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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a cooperative effort to create a series of web-based multimedia exhibits uniting oral history with historical images to portray the complex history of the Colorado Plateau region. Lead by a university library, regional libraries and museums worked in collaboration to integrate historical and cultural materials from each of the partnering institutions to tell the engaging story of this unique part of America. Voices of the Colorado Plateau features online multimedia exhibits where real people tell real stories. The menus are simple and users can experience the museum with a minimum of searching and clicking. The site takes advantage of both World Wide Web multimedia and streaming technologies offering online patrons compelling and educational presentations. If more information is desired, there are simple routes to gain access to full interviews, complete photo collections or access to the host museum/library web site. This is one of a new generation of online cultural heritage sites endeavoring to make library and museum artifacts more accessible, more compelling and more human. (Contains eight references.) (Author/AEF)

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Heritage Through Oral History and Archival Images

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Abstract:

This paper reports on a cooperative effort in the U.S. to create a series of web-based multimedia exhibits uniting oral history with historical images to portray the complex history of the Colorado Plateau region. Lead by a university library, regional libraries and museums worked in collaboration to integrate historical and cultural materials from each of the partnering institutions to tell the engaging story of this unique part of America.

Background

Libraries, archives and museums are excited by the many possibilities provided by the World Wide Web (WWW) to share their cultural heritage information with a broader audience. Since the late 1990's it has become increasingly popular for museums and libraries to offer electronic access to their collections. A speaker at the 1997 *Museums and the Web Conference* introduced his remarks by saying, "The World Wide Web has cast a powerful spell on museums and museum professionals as a medium for reaching new audiences and fulfilling their educational missions."(Donovan, 1997) and the Research Library Group (RLG) has made electronic access to cultural artifacts a priority for the 21st Century (Improving Access,

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2000).
A fair number of early adopters began creating online libraries and museums in the mid-1990s and by the end of the century Internet patrons had a wide range of virtual collections to choose from. But as the novelty of online collections wanes some library professionals and Internet surfers are beginning to wonder if access to data bases and digital artifacts is enough.

Many of the latest developments in virtual collections place new emphasis on the notion that libraries are in the business of disseminating information, not artifacts. A growing number of libraries and museums, both traditional and online, are beginning to recognize that they can move beyond displaying artifacts and begin to explore ways of creating exhibits that place objects in a narrative context within a larger perspective. Curators interested in online exhibits are experimenting with innovative uses of Internet technologies to share artifacts and information in new ways.

Digital exhibits present opportunities for cultural heritage institutions to cooperate and collaborate in new ways. Libraries can work with museums and other cultural heritage institutions to combine and contrast artifacts in a much simpler and efficient manner than could ever be achieved within the bricks-and-mortar museum world of the past. Researchers at the University of Michigan (USA) have noted the great possibilities provided by the WWW for combining and integrating materials from many collections in order to tell an even greater story. "Since the Web is based on distributed input in digital form, it permits both production and consumption of information; it makes possible a model for organizing and sharing images, sound files, and other materials from a number of sources" (Holland and Smith, 1999).

Research is beginning to show that online patrons are looking for the deeper and richer experiences that such innovations can provide. Recent studies analyzing visitors of Web museums have discovered that a majority are seeking exhibits that go beyond a data base of disparate objects. Visitors to virtual museums are looking for guided tours and exhibits that present information created by knowledgeable professionals that help them to understand and appreciate artifacts in their artistic and historical context. These initial studies are discovering that when users go to a web site of arts and culture they want to do more looking and less clicking. Many online patrons have the necessary technology to view video and multimedia presentations and are looking for exhibits that take advantage of these features to present more vivid narratives and deeper contextual information (Vergo, 2001; Kravchyna, 2002; Fry, 2002)

Project Report

Voices of the Colorado Plateau is a new online multimedia exhibit exploring the use of sound and images to offer patrons a new kind of WWW library experience. The Voices project is a collaborative effort uniting eight cultural heritage institutions in three states ringing the Colorado Plateau region of the U.S. This unique cooperative effort was funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a government agency that fosters innovation, leadership and a lifetime of learning.

The project uses WWW technology to address two key issues for online museums as discussed in the research above: broadening museum offerings through collaboration and using multimedia tools to create more compelling exhibits.

Collaboration

An obvious partner for libraries that seek to provide quality context and "great stories" for WWW patrons is academia. University faculty and libraries can offer contextual expertise as well as the advanced technological experience that many museums lack. A 1998 research project promoting this specific type of

cooperation sponsored by the Andrew Mellon Foundation found that "there is much university enthusiasm for the use of digital surrogates for cultural heritage material. . . [and] universities and museums have common interests in providing images and metadata to users. . . [they] have more common than divergent interests and can work well together"(Besser and Yamashita, 1998). There is also evidence that such cooperative efforts will make cultural heritage materials more accessible and meaningful, and these partnerships may also prove to be more economical and efficient (Sherwood, 1998).

Technology The online exhibits combine oral history sound recordings and historical images from all eight institutions to tell captivating stories that no single institution could produce on its own. The lead institution for the Voices of the Colorado Plateau is the Sherratt Library at Southern Utah University (SUU). A small cadre of faculty and students with experience in archives, artifacts, Web design and multimedia technology are the focal point for the creation of the online exhibits. The core collaborative team, with one representative from each partnering institution set the course for the project deciding on important themes to be addressed by the exhibits. Then each individual institution combed its own collections to find outstanding oral histories that discuss and illustrate the chosen themes. The best histories, as chosen by the partners, were reviewed to find powerful and compelling excerpts that both portrait important historical events and reveal the human story behind the history. Once a short vignette had been identified all the partners then worked to provide illustrative material to support the chosen story

In this very involved and sometimes complicated collaborative effort it has been the tried and true Internet tools rather than bleeding edge technologies that have proven most useful. The sharing of information and narrowing of topics; the selection and sharing of individual sound bites and images; as well as general planning and reporting have all been handled via e-mail. The power of this ubiquitous Internet offering should never be under valued or taken for granted in any collaborative project. Another very important and by Internet standards a very "old" tool that proved indispensable was file transfer protocol (ftp). The eight partnering institutions in this project are spread over 83,000 square miles of some of the most rugged landscape in North America and just to make things more interesting the area is bisected by the Grand Canyon. Sharing recordings and images across these great distances safely, cheaply and efficiently would be impossible relying on a shuttle service or overnight mail. Electronic transfer of large digitized sound and image files was accomplished with ease. Collections of 30-50 photographic images were sent complete with accompanying text files for easy identification and attribution. As exhibits came together it was sometimes necessary to request specific images to complete story designs and these single, smaller files were most often forwarded as attachments to e-mail. This work seems a prime example of what Holland and Smith foresaw in 1999 (Holland, 1999).

No one working on the Voices of the Colorado Plateau project has the luxury of devoting full time to the effort, in fact, most of the participants have several projects, administrative responsibilities or teaching assignments to worry about as well. All were able to stay in touch and contribute to the project through time proximate but asynchronous communication made possible through Internet-based telecommunication. This type of read-it-when-you-can-and-respond-as-soon-as-possible communication is a key to successful collaboration in the Internet Age.

Paradigms It is also important to mention the benefits derived by the partners from participating in a museum/library collaboration. Though these institution have a lot in common their professional practice and culture also have their differences. The project partners are pleased with the synergy generated through the collaborative process. The exhibits bear evidence of the library as well as the museum approach to cultural heritage. The joint effort required give and take from both sides. A simple example is in the presentation of artifacts:

Museums are comfortable, even anxious, to provide patrons with interpretation but are loth to offer access to their collections.

Libraries stress access to everything but are extremely reluctant to provide any sort of interpretation.

As the two groups worked together in the project a design for the exhibits took shape that reflected both camps. The multimedia exhibits are interpretive but at the conclusion of each presentation the patron has the opportunity to review the individual artifacts (sound and images) that comprise the exhibit with complete attribution for each item. In addition, each exhibit contains a short historical essay placing the narrowly focused exhibit into a broader regional and/or national context.

Multimedia Exhibits

As described above the multimedia exhibits feature both oral history recordings and historical images drawn from the collections of all eight partnering institutions. Recent user studies, as discussed earlier, are revealing the wisdom of the original vision of this project. The plan was to create short, captivating presentations that would stand alone as interpretive exhibits but at the same time could serve as introductions or gateways to the larger interviews and collections from which the exhibits were drawn. This is in keeping with the "less clicking more watching" approach advocated by the IBM study cited earlier (Vargo, 2001).

Access to the exhibits from the main page is provided through three simple menu choices that organize the exhibits accordingly: People, Places, and Topics. Each choice provides the online patron with a list of narrower choices to choose from: names of the interviewers, locations of the events, or subjects covered. Each person, location and subject provides up to four exhibits to view. In addition to a list of locations, the Places page also provides an interactive map of the Colorado Plateau that also serves as a menu for the exhibits.

After viewing an exhibit the user can 1) review all the images used in the exhibit, accompanied by the complete attribution, 2) read a short historical essay placing the exhibit in a larger historical context, 3) temporarily exit the exhibit to hear, or read, the complete oral history interview, or 4) view another exhibit from the current section.

From the outset, the multimedia production team realized that the oral history interviews were the lynch pin of the project. Voices of the Colorado Plateau, as the name implies, is about the personal, individual experience (voice) within the larger tide of history. The designers felt sure that if the excerpt were chosen carefully the exhibit would be captivating and educational with the added images and editing serving to enhance it. It was the power inherent in real stories told by real, everyday people that guided the design and creation of the exhibits.

Flash 5®, by Macromedia, was used to create the multimedia exhibits. Flash offers many important tools that helped make the design, creation, and distribution of the exhibits very professional and efficient. Layering inside the Flash movies made it easy to build the hierarchical organization of the site. Simple animation tools allowed the designers to fade and pan images in a manner reminiscent of documentary films. Multiple sound channels in the creation phase are collapsed and compressed into a very efficient MPEG format for distribution while maintaining the unique, personal sound and passion of each narrator. The final Flash files (.swf) are relatively small and will load on a typical home computer with a 56Kb connection in less than thirty seconds.

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Conclusion

Voices of the Colorado Plateau features online multimedia exhibits where real people tell real stories. The menus are simple and users can experience the museum with a minimum of searching and clicking. The site takes advantage of both WWW multimedia and streaming technologies offering online patrons compelling and educational presentations. If more information is desired there are simple routes to gain access to full interviews, complete photo collections or access to the host museum/library web site. This is one of a new generation of online cultural heritage sites endeavoring to make library and museum artifacts more accessible, more compelling and more human.

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